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OUR INHERITED PRACTICE IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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IV. FREE SCHOOLS AND THE LANCASTERIAN SYSTEM

This is the fourth of a series of papers which aim to illustrate a method of studying the history of education in which the emphasis is placed on educational practice in its relation to social conditions. The Lancastrian monitorial or mutual instruction system, which prevailed in the larger cities of the United States during the first quarter of the nineteenth century serves as an admirable illustration in contrasting this kind of history of education with the history of educational theory.

This system was imported from England in 1806 for use in New York city schools. It derived its name from the use of the more capable children as instructors of the others who were organized in small groups, and from its exploitation by Joseph Lancaster.

Some histories of modern education do not mention the Lancastrian system at all, in others it is given only passing comment as a discredited method, and in general, writers express surprise that the system should ever have been considered or used. These same authors will present at length the theories contained in the *Great Didactic* of Comenius published in 1657, but which was forgotten for two centuries and only re-discovered in 1841. Yet the theories of Comenius for the improvement of the technique of instruction in elementary schools were practically unknown in America, while the Lancastrian methods which aimed at the same result, were being used as the basis of rapid improvement in elementary education.

In some respects Comenius and Lancaster were quite similar. They were both practical teachers who invented many improved devices which were used successfully in practice, and they were

both enthusiastic about the possibility of formulating a mechanical method which would, in a way, work itself. The following quotation from Comenius serves to represent the ideas of such a method held by both men.

The art of teaching, therefore, demands nothing more than the skilful arrangement of time, of the subjects taught, and of the method. As soon as we have succeeded in finding the proper method it will be no harder to teach schoolboys, in any number desired, than with the help of the printing-press to cover a thousand sheets daily with the neatest writing, or with Archimedes' machine to move houses, towers, and immense weights, or to cross the ocean in a ship, and journey to the New World. The whole process, too, will be as free from friction as is the movement of a dock whose motive power is supplied by the weights. It will be as pleasant to see education carried out on my plan as to look at an automatic machine of this kind, and the process will be as free from failure as are these mechanical contrivances when skilfully made.

From the standpoint of present day theory in which freedom and individuality is emphasized the mechanics of the Lancasterian system may seem absurd, but if we consider it in the light of the lack of public provision for education in the first quarter of the nineteenth century and in contrast with the unintelligent wasteful methods of instruction then in vogue in elementary schools, we can better appreciate the exaggerated hopes for the system expressed at that time. Such men as Governor De Witt Clinton, of New York, Governor Wolcott of Connecticut, William Russell, editor of the *American Journal of Education*, John Griscom, noted scientist and educator, who through a period of more than twenty years believed in the system, were not visionaries to be led astray by an irrational device. Governor De Witt Clinton's tribute to the system is best known. In 1809, he said:

When I perceive that many boys in our school have been taught to read and write in two months, who did not before know the alphabet, and that even one has accomplished it in three weeks—when I view all the bearings and tendencies of this system—when I contemplate the habits of order which it forms, the spirit of emulation which it excites, the rapid improvement which it produces, the purity of morals which it inculcates—when I behold the extraordinary union of celerity in instruction and economy of expense—and when I perceive one great assembly of a thou-

¹ Comenius, *The Great Didactic* (Keatinge), p. 248.

sand children, under the eye of a single teacher, marching with unexampled rapidity and with perfect discipline to the goal of knowledge, I confess that I recognize in Lancaster the benefactor of the human race. I consider his system as creating a new era in education, as a blessing sent down from heaven to redeem the poor and distressed of this world from the power and dominion of ignorance.²

Governor Wolcott of Connecticut in his message to the legislature in 1825 said:

If funds can be obtained to defray the expenses of the necessary preparations, I have no doubt, that schools on the Lancasterian model, ought as soon as possible to be established in several parts of this state. Wherever from two hundred to one thousand children can be convened within a suitable distance, this mode of instruction, in every branch of reading, speaking, penmanship, arithmetic, and bookkeeping, will be found much more efficient, direct and economical, than the practices now generally pursued in our primary schools.³

The testimony of a prominent contemporary professional educator is of the same nature as that of the two governors quoted. William Russell was editor of the first successful American educational periodical, the *American Journal of Education*, published from 1826 to 1830. Mr. Russell was one of the most important schoolmen of the period, in touch with educational movements in Europe and America, interested in the training of teachers, in Pestalozzianism, and other methods of improving teaching. In 1826 he edited a *Manual of Mutual Instruction*, containing directions for organizing instruction on the Lancasterian plan and a history and justification of the method. In the preface it is stated that the volume is issued in response to repeated calls which had been made "at the office of the *Journal of Education* for information concerning the system of mutual instruction, and for works calculated to assist teachers in introducing it." This little volume of 121 pages is a most instructive source of information as a contemporary description of the development of the system in New York City, Albany, New Haven, Boston, and elsewhere. Mr. Russell strongly

² W. O. Bourne, *History of the Public School Society of City of New York*, p. 19.

³ Wm. Russell, *Manual of Mutual Instruction* (Boston, 1826), p. 102.

favorable the system and even printed an argument of fourteen pages in favor of adopting it in colleges.

The enthusiasm of Dr. John Griscom for the monitorial system lends additional evidence of its significance. Mr. Griscom's travels published as *A Year in Europe* is one of our best sources for information concerning schools of that period. In 1805 he opened the first course of popular lectures on physics and chemistry given in New York City. He was the principal organizer of the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism and of the New York House of Refuge (1824). Mr. Griscom had been impressed with the successful operation of the monitorial system in the New York elementary schools and had visited the High School of Edinburgh where, he said :

I saw a school, eminent almost to a proverb for the elevated tone of its classical attainments, entirely under the regimen of the monitorial system. Such was the success attending it, that it was universally admitted that the 150 boys under the head master made a more rapid progress, were more thoroughly taught, and pursued their studies with more vigor and alacrity, than in any institution in which the monitorial system was not adopted.⁴

Impressed with the necessity of a similar high school in New York City, Mr. Griscom organized a stock company, erected a three-story building, employed a competent assistant, and in 1825 opened a school which soon contained 650 scholars. It continued in successful operation until 1831 when the building was sold to the Society of Mechanics and Tradesmen who desired it for a school which they maintained.

The previous discussion has shown the enthusiastic belief in the value of the monitorial system which prevailed among political leaders, scientists, and professional educators. Certain factors in the social situation which justified such enthusiasm may now be examined. Two of these are especially important, first, the lack of public support for free schools, especially in the Middle Atlantic states, and second, the growth of cities and the resulting concentration of ignorance, vagrancy, pauperism, vice, and crime.

⁴ *Memoir of John Griscom*, LL.D. (New York, 1859), p. 202.

1. The lack of public provision for free schools was almost universal in the Middle Atlantic states, while in New England, where the early Puritan spirit had provided laws which required schools to be maintained, the actual practice in many places at the beginning of the nineteenth century was to have a very inferior school for only a few months out of the year. In Boston only private tuition schools existed to teach children to read. Yet children had to be able to read before they were admitted to the public writing or grammar schools. As a consequence hundreds of children of poor parents grew up in ignorance. Not until 1818 were public primary schools established in Boston.

In New York City up to 1806 there existed only private and parochial tuition schools and a few private charity schools. In 1806 was opened the first school of the Free School Society, a private corporation which soon maintained free charity schools on a large scale. There was no local public Board of Education in New York City until 1842, although moneys for the support of schools were received from the State Common School Fund from 1815, and from local tax beginning 1829. In Pennsylvania there were no public free schools except "pauper schools" until 1834. Similar conditions existed in the other Middle Atlantic states.

As late as 1840 in New York City, even with the facilities provided by the (Free) Public School Society, only 60 per cent. of the children of school age were under instruction; and in Brooklyn only 30 per cent., the commissioners of common schools of that city attributing the inferiority to the district system which prevailed there. In Williamsburg only 14 per cent. were under instruction. The cost of instructing a child in New York about 1840 was \$2.70 a year. In Brooklyn the cost was a little over \$3.00. During the life of the New York Public School Society (1805-54) the annual cost of instruction per child seldom exceeded \$5.00, varying from \$1.37 in 1822 to \$5.83 in 1852.⁵

If these figures are compared with the amounts spent today for free public instruction we can realize the change that has

⁵ Bourne, *op. cit.*, p. 509 (xxxii).

taken place. The median annual cost per child for elementary schooling in 1902-3 in some fifty cities in the North Atlantic states was found by Strayer to be \$28.50, one city spending as much as \$55.00.⁶

The only kind of instruction that could be hoped for in free schools in the first part of the nineteenth century was *cheap* instruction. The Lancasterian system provided such instruction. This, no doubt, was the chief social reason for its adoption, but it must not be forgotten that contemporary evidence indicated that its *effectiveness* in training the large groups of children which it was desirable to handle in city districts, made it superior to the methods of instruction commonly pursued.

2. The second social factor which bore an important relation to the adoption of the Lancasterian system, was the growth of cities. In 1800 there were in the United States 6 cities having a population of over 8,000; in 1810 there were 11; in 1820, 13; and in 1830, 26. The population of the six largest cities in 1800 is shown below.⁷

Philadelphia	69,403	Boston	24,937
New York	60,489	Charleston	20,473
Baltimore	26,114	Salem	9,457

In these cities existed concentrated ignorance, vagrancy, pauperism, vice, and crime. Public-spirited citizens who were concerned about the degraded social condition of the lower classes in the cities, organized societies to study and improve it. Thus in New York City there was organized in 1817 the Society for the Prevention of Pauperism. This society undertook the establishment of a savings bank, an apprentices' library, and other enterprises. Defects in the penitentiary system were attacked, especially the confining of vagrant children with hardened criminals. A private subscription of \$17,000 was raised for the establishment of a House of Refuge for Juvenile Delinquents, which was opened in 1825.

The same peculiar social problems of city life were uppermost in the minds of the citizens who established free schools on

⁶ G. D. Strayer, *City School Expenditures* (Teachers College, 1906).

⁷ A. F. Weber, *Growth of Cities in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 21.

the Lancasterian basis. This fact was expressed by De Witt Clinton in the same speech from which was quoted his eulogy of Lancaster.

A number of benevolent citizens had seen, with concern, the increasing vices of the city, arising, in a great degree, from the neglected education of the poor. Great cities are, at all times, the nurseries and hotbeds of crimes. Bad men from all quarters repair to them, in order to obtain the benefit of concealment, and to enjoy in a superior degree the advantages of rapine and fraud. . . . The mendicant parent bequeaths his squalid poverty to his offspring, and the hardened thief transmits a legacy of infamy to his unfortunate and depraved descendants. . . . In this state of turpitude and idleness, leading lives of roving mendicancy and petty depredation [these children existed] a burden and disgrace to the community.⁸

A similar situation confronted the leaders of the movement for the establishment of free primary schools in Boston (1818).

These gentlemen had long been united in forwarding various projects for the amelioration and improvement of the condition of the poor. It was mainly through their exertions that the "Provident Institution for Savings" had been put into operation, and its success had encouraged them to further efforts in the same direction.⁹

The several points that have been discussed thus far, namely, the enthusiasm for the Lancasterian system, the lack of provision for free public instruction, and the concentrated ignorance and depravity existing in the growing cities, may be studied to advantage in connection with the development of public schools in Pennsylvania. The state constitution adopted in 1790 contained this provision: "The legislature shall, as soon as conveniently may be, provide by law for the establishment of schools throughout the state, in such manner that the poor may be taught gratis."

For many years the legislature did nothing more than seek to aid churches and private schools to provide free education for the poor. There was no law for this purpose, even, until 1802, and it merely provided that the tuition of poor children attending a school in any neighborhood should be paid by the overseers

⁸ Bourne, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

⁹ Wightman, *Annals of the Boston Primary School Committee*, p. 18.

of the poor from the public fund. The law compelled parents to declare their poverty, in other words, to pauperize themselves, and in a slightly modified form was the only general provision for free education in Pennsylvania, down to 1834, when the state established a free public school system for all children.

A special law of 1818 established Philadelphia as the "First School District of Pennsylvania," and authorized the district to maintain free public schools for "indigent orphan children or children of indigent parents." These were "pauper schools" but were organized under the control of a public Board of Controllers. The law required these schools to use Lancaster's methods in their most approved state. "Philadelphia had no free schools open to the children of the rich and poor alike, until after the law of 1818 had been amended, in 1836, so as to admit all children without distinction."¹⁰

Previous to this public provision for educating poor children in Philadelphia, philanthropic individuals and societies had been active in the same cause. Thus in 1799, three young men opened a night school for poor children, and two years later organized "The Philadelphia Society for the Establishment and Support of Charity Schools." In 1807, another similar association was formed which opened schools for boys and girls on the Lancasterian plan.

The law of 1818 which provided for the establishment of free public "pauper schools" in Philadelphia was the result of the activities of a "Society for the Promotion of Public Economy," which was organized to relieve the distress among the poor during the winter of 1816-17. One of the committees of the society was on public schools. It investigated the possibilities of the Lancasterian system and framed the law which the legislature was induced to pass.

The close connection existing between this early movement to establish free schools in Pennsylvania and the use of the Lancasterian system is suggested in this paragraph by Wickersham.

The special acts relating to education in Philadelphia and in the counties above mentioned, were prompted by a new plan of school man-

¹⁰ Wickersham, *History of Education in Pennsylvania*, p. 287.

agement, called Lancasterian, after its author, Joseph Lancaster, which began to take root in Pennsylvania about 1809. Schools conducted on this plan were established at Philadelphia, Lancaster, Columbia, Harrisburg, Pittsburg, Milton, Erie, New Castle, Greencastle and perhaps at a few other places.¹¹

The economy of this system which appealed to legislators who were not willing to appropriate money for the elementary education of any but pauper children may be judged from the ratio of teachers to pupils. In Philadelphia in 1819, there were 10 public Lancasterian schools, with 10 teachers and 2,845 pupils, or one teacher for 284 pupils; in 1834, 20 schools, 31 teachers and 6,767 pupils, or one teacher for 218 pupils.

The important service of the Lancasterian schools in Philadelphia is stated by Wickersham in these words:

The Lancasterian schools served the good purpose of hastening the adoption of the free school system, by gradually preparing the way for the heavy taxation the support of such a system necessarily incurs. They did more; they awakened thought and provoked discussion on the question of education in all its aspects, the result of which was a more enlightened public sentiment on the subject. In addition, to the Lancasterian system Philadelphia and Pennsylvania are deeply indebted for another thing. It brought with it the idea of the necessity of trained teachers, and this idea outlived the system of which it was a part, and became permanently incorporated into the educational policy of the city and the state. The establishment of a Model School for the preparation of teachers was provided for in the law of 1818, and as a school of this kind it was the first established in the country. In 1821 this school was attended by five hundred and sixty-four pupils, and teachers were prepared therein not only for the schools of the city, but to some extent for those in other parts of the state.

It is evident from the preceding discussion that the social situation in American cities at the beginning of the nineteenth century justifies and explains the enthusiastic belief which prevailed in the usefulness of the Lancasterian system. The two characteristics of the system upon which this belief was based were its cheapness and its effectiveness in handling large groups of children. It was cheap because it employed monitors. It was

¹¹ Wickersham, *op. cit.*, p. 270.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 289.

effective because it embodied the results of a careful study of every detail of classroom management and the reduction of these details to an exact system.

Effective "school keeping" involves two types of problems or factors which Bagley has distinguished as the "routine factors" and the "judgment factors." The routine factors are defined as those measures which aim to build up a number of specific habits in the various individuals of the group and to organize a system that will take care of the mechanical details. The judgment factors concern the variables which it is necessary to consider, the constant readjustments which a teacher has to make in the interests of the individuals constituting the group.

The history of education has been written largely from the standpoint of the second type of teaching problems, as if the whole problem of effective teaching consisted in such complete provision for individuality as Rousseau advocated in the *Émile*. This point of view would seem to imply that the handling of children in a group is simply a concession to financial necessity and that the tutorial education advocated by the educational reformers to whom so much space is usually given, namely Rabelais, Montaigne, Locke and Rousseau, is the best realization of the aim of education. To those who hold this view, any teaching process that includes elements similar to military drill is non-educative.

In opposition to this interpretation, it may be maintained that both types of training are essentially educative, that the routine elements in school work have a positive, permanent value for the individual as well as the "judgment" factors, that each needs to be provided and that it is better to have the first without the second than to have neither, that effective military drill is better than a loose, lazy, idle, passive, inattentive, slipshod existence which encourages the formation of many bad negative habits, and few good positive habits.

The prevailing "school keeping" at the beginning of the nineteenth century was of this latter type. It was not effective either from the standpoint of routine or educative individual attention. It was predominantly country "school keeping," and

the methods of the country school had been adopted in the city schools which were usually small and in charge of a single teacher. That is, instead of taking advantage of the possibility of forming a number of large schools with several teachers in different rooms having charge of children of the same age, many small one-room schools were located in different parts of the towns. The "country-school" or district-school methods employed in these schools were described in the first paper. The teaching was such that a child "had the privilege of forty minutes' worth of teaching and three hundred and twenty minutes' worth of sitting still," the master's time being all consumed with hearing individuals recite their lessons, making pens, setting copies, and keeping order. The systematic grading of schools was practically unknown at the beginning of the century.

Even in the well-organized public primary schools of Boston, which merely taught the elements of reading, writing, and spelling, there were in 1820 four classes in each school all under one teacher.¹³ In New York City as late as 1829, out of a total of 24,952 children attending school, 15,320 were in 430 private schools which employed 432 principal teachers and 259 assistants. This averaged 1 to 2 teachers and 33 pupils per school.¹⁴ We read of "a handsome two-story brick building erected in 1792" in Boston, in which "in one apartment Writing and Arithmetic is taught; in another, Spelling, Reading, English Grammar and Geography." Other schools described were of either one or two rooms.¹⁵ I have read of a four-room school building erected at this time in which a teacher in each room conducted a school on the district plan having children of all ages and using the method of individual recitation.

Thus we see that the mechanics of school keeping, the routine factors in school management, were given little consideration and as a consequence an enormous amount of waste existed. There was just as little consideration of the judgment factors, that is of provision for educative individual attention. Improve-

¹³ Wightman, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

¹⁴ Bcurne, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

¹⁵ Wightman, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

ment along this line was not affected until the influence of Pestalozzian methods was felt, to a limited extent in the second quarter of the century, but not to any considerable degree until the Oswego movement in 1860. Improvement in the routine factors of teaching began much earlier and received its chief impulse from the Lancasterian system.

The Lancasterian system marked an advance over contemporary practice in the following respects:

1. In making a careful and complete study of classroom management and of the mechanics of instruction. This has been a prominent element in the work of most successful educational institutions and systems, and the schools of Lancaster would be classed with those of John Sturm, the Jesuits, and the Brethren of the Christian Schools which were acknowledged in their day to be the most effective schools in existence.

2. Just as economy was a fundamental element in the financial organization, so it was in the school routine. While the routine of passing of classes, taking attendance, changing work, etc., was organized so as to consume a minimum of time, the teaching was so organized as to keep all the pupils employed all the time. It is said that Lancaster invented the mottoes, "A place for everything and everything in its place" and "Let every child at every moment have something to do and a motive for doing it."

3. Special attention was devoted in the construction of the schoolroom to lighting, ventilation, slant of floor, seating, elimination of noise, etc. Great ingenuity was shown in devising apparatus that would assist in teaching, such as sand tables for writing, blackboards, reading charts, etc.

4. Children were carefully classified according to attainments into larger or smaller groups, and in some cases a child could recite with one group in arithmetic and another group in reading or spelling.

5. Studying and learning were made active social processes rather than passive individual processes. A child was always studying or working or reciting as a member of a group, producing some objective result to which the monitor or the rest of

the class gave attention. Emulation was the chief social instinct stimulated, as was the case with the Jesuits and parallel results were secured. There was much marching back and forth and alternation of seat work and standing recitations.

6. Teachers were carefully selected and trained, and they undertook teaching as a permanent career. For their guidance manuals of instruction were prepared giving detailed directions for school keeping, another parallel to the efficient schools of the Jesuits and of the Brethren of the Christian Schools.